



A STUDY GUIDE TO
**THE
SHEPHERDS'
PRAYER**

A Christmas Novel

STUDY GROUPS

Preparation

Prior to the study group's first meeting, all participants should read the following portions of *The Shepherds' Prayer*: the author's introduction (called "The Story Behind the Shepherds' Prayer" and found inside the front of the dust jacket), the prologue and chapters 1-2. They will also need the following materials:

- 1) A copy of *The Shepherds' Prayer*
- 2) A Bible
- 3) The introduction to the study (see p. 3 below).

Length of study group program

We recommend that your study group program last 4 weeks. Since the study program is designed to complement the season of Advent, we recommend the four weeks of Advent (the weeks in December leading up to Christmas) as the best time for the study, although beginning in the last week of November before Advent may be a good choice where there is concern about conflict with other events and commitments in late December. The length of each study can be varied based on the number of questions you choose to discuss each week and the time constraints of your group or church.

Choosing the questions for discussion

This guide is arranged around several themes that occur in the story, *The Shepherds' Prayer*. The group leader may wish to select among the themes and questions in the interest of time.

How to conduct a study session

It is recommended that each member of the study group read in advance the selection from *The Shepherds' Prayer* to be discussed at a particular session. You should print or photocopy as many copies of this study guide as needed so your group conversations are more fruitful.

1. Discussion sessions should typically last about 30 to 60 minutes.
Your time could be allocated in the following way:

30-Minute Session

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|------------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and Opening Prayer | 5 minutes |
| • Discussion of Questions | 20 minutes |
| • Closing Meditation and Petitions | 5 minutes |

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

45-Minute Session

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|------------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and Opening Prayer | 5 minutes |
| • Discussion of Questions | 35 minutes |
| • Closing Meditation and Petitions | 5 minutes |

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

60-Minute Session

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|------------------------------------|------------|
| • Greetings and Opening Prayer | 10 minutes |
| • Discussion of Questions | 40 minutes |
| • Closing Meditation and Petitions | 10 minutes |

(See recommended meditations at the end of each section of Questions)

2. It is important for each session to start and end on time so people can rely on this consistency. In particular, it often hurts attendance if the ending time changes from week to week.
3. The group leader should be familiar with both the *The Shepherds' Prayer* and this study guide. While formal theological training is not necessary, the group study will be more fruitful if the leader is well-versed in the Bible and Christian teachings. This will help your discussions bear more fruit.
4. Individual group members should read selected portions of *The Shepherds' Prayer* in advance of each week's study. Bible readings for the study can be distributed among participants for reading at the study or in advance, at the facilitator's discretion.

INTRODUCTION TO FIRST LESSON

(Study leader should make enough copies of this for each participant and distribute them before the study.)

Welcome to this study of:

THE SHEPHERDS' PRAYER

A Christmas Novel

This compelling story follows a thoughtful, questioning protagonist into the very heart of the Christmas story—and to an encounter with the Incarnate Christ.

There are several themes woven within this story and each theme will be highlighted to a greater or lesser extent each week. Here is a capsule overview of each theme. You may wish to look for these themes while you read each week's suggested passages as they will form the basis of the discussion questions.

1. The Advent Journey: The protagonist (hero) of our story spends a good portion of the narrative on a journey. As he proceeds on his way, unbeknownst to him, Christ is coming toward him. *The Advent journey then is one of moving toward the Lord who is Himself coming to us.*

2. The Existential Questions: The protagonist of the story is journeying in search of answers to deep and fundamental human questions of identity and meaning. You may find echoes of your own deepest questions in his.

3. The story is a historical fiction—that is to say that it is set within real events that are part of both biblical, sacred history and part of secular history, just as our own lives and personal stories are. The fulfillment of prophecy—in essence history written in advance—calls attention to the Sovereignty of God and the inexorable working out of His purposes in time and in our own lives.

The reading for our first week's study is *The Shepherds' Prayer*: the author's introduction (called "The Story Behind the Shepherds' Prayer" and found inside the front of the dust jacket), the prologue (pp. 9-11), and chapters 1-2 (pp.13-29)

Our first weekly study will meet at _____ on _____,
location day of the week

_____ from _____ to _____. For info call _____.
date time time phone #

Suggested list of questions for study

NOTE: The following numbered questions refer to material in *The Shepherds' Prayer* along with supplemental sources, either cited Scriptures which can be read as time permits or quotations from other works included within this study guide. Page numbers for the section of the book referenced in the question appear in parentheses. Some questions will simply be marked "discussion," because they are asking participants to answer from their own experience. These questions are prepared for use of the study facilitator who may distribute them in advance to participants if he or she so desires.

WEEK 1

The Story Behind

1. Barry calls the story of the people of Bethlehem and the shepherds an "untold" story. Although the shepherds always make an appearance in Christmas pageants and manger scenes, would you agree that most of us have given very little thought to them as living persons and the impact of the events of Christmas night on their lives? How do you think that focusing on these characters might make the very familiar story of Christmas seem fresh and new? (Discussion)

Prologue

2. Read Matthew 2:16-18 and Jeremiah 31:15. When we enter in our imagination into the thoughts and feelings of the young mother tragically portrayed here, do we imagine that she knew what was happening to her was a fulfillment of some ancient prophecy? Might we often be similarly blind as to how tragic events on our own lives are part of God's plan? (Prologue)

3. Historically Christians have celebrated the untimely deaths of the little children of Bethlehem in the "feast of the Holy Innocents," December 28. This is also called "Childermas Day" and traditionally has been a day for parents to bless their children. What traditions do our church or families have for remembering this event? (Discussion)

Chapter 1

4. How is Anam established within the first few paragraphs as a man who is suffering from profound isolation even within the midst of a loving family celebration? (pp 13, 14)

5. How does his isolation at the family gathering imply a larger sense of isolation within his society? (pp 14-16)

6. Anam begins his journey with a movement toward his own foster-father. What is it about his father that encourages him to take this step? (pp 16-17)

7. What is revealed by his prayer before he goes to his father, Micah? (pp 16)

Chapter 2

8. Does Anam's sense of receiving Divine guidance erase all his doubts? How does the author show that he is moving from doubt to resolution in the midst of doubt? Is this mental and spiritual state and movement something we can relate to? (pp 19, 20; discussion)

9. The author crystallizes the Messianic expectation (see Luke 3: 15) among Jews of this time in the person of Micah reading from the prophet Isaiah. Anam has come to ask a question of his father, only to find his father asking a question of Sacred Scripture. How do the father's comments about suffering form a bridge between the two questions? (pp. 22)

10. Anam's real name and family origin are unknown. His father says about the circumstance under which he found Anam, "the scene was a mystery to me." To Anam his lack of a known personal history is a matter of shame, something that propels him to search for an answer. In this, how is Anam "Everyman"? (pp 23-29, discussion)

Recommended Closing Meditation:

Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we men, who are a due part of your creation, long to praise you—we also carry our mortality about with us, carry the evidence of our sin and with it the proof that you thwart the proud. You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.—

This is an excerpt from the famous passage from St. Augustine's Confessions (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5).

Lord, please guide our Advent journey and prepare our restless hearts to welcome the Incarnate Word.

Take prayer requests and close with the Lord's Prayer or as the facilitator chooses.

Preparation for Next Week

Prior to the study group's second meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 3-4 (pp. 31-60).

WEEK 2

Chapter 3

1. What questions are consuming Anam as he sets out on his journey to Bethlehem? Have you ever asked similar questions? Is it normal to wonder if we matter to God? How do we see Anam once again moving through doubt to resolution in the midst of doubt? (pp 31-34)
2. Through the emotional words of Johanan, the author, Richard M. Barry, calls us to reflection on the fact that the joyful story of Christmas was marred by great sorrow visited upon Bethlehem and the surrounding area with the death of the male infants at the cruel order of Herod. For many of us also Christmas may be tinged with memories that cause pain. Reflect on the difference between forced "happiness" that denies real sorrow and true joy that carries us through sorrow. Are any in our study group bearing particular sorrows this Christmas? (pp 45-46)

Chapter 4

3. Read these Bible passages about shepherds:

On Abel: Genesis 4: 1-9; Luke 11:50, 51; Heb. 11:4

On Moses: Exodus 3: 1-2; Deuteronomy 18.15-19

On David: 1 Samuel 16: 4-13; 17: 33-37; 1 Chronicles 11: 1-3

On God as a Shepherd to His People: Ezekiel 34: 11, 35; John 10: 11-15

Considering the role of shepherds in salvation history, was it fitting that the Shepherds of Bethlehem should be the very ones to have the Christmas message declared to them by a heavenly messenger? (discussion)

4. Had you ever before considered the effect of the angelic announcement on the subsequent day-to-day lives of the shepherds of Bethlehem? How does the author portray the complexity of their situation and their attitudes toward it? (pp 54-59)
5. Since he left Bethlehem to search for the shepherds how has Anam's heart been further prepared to hear their message? (pp 50-52; 56-57)

Recommended Closing Meditation:

Psalm 23

L. The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want;

***R. The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.***

He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;

He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

***R. The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.***

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

***R. The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.***

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

***R. The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.***

Lord, please shepherd us on our Advent journey and give us the faith of the shepherds of Bethlehem that we may hear and believe the Good News of Great Joy.

Preparation for Next Week

Prior to the study group's third meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 5-6 (pp 63-92).

WEEK 3

Chapter 5

1. The journey of faith begins with questions and the response of God to our questions is to send witnesses into the world. Recall any witnesses to faith in Christ who had a particular impact on your faith journey.
2. Anam's journey has brought him to the point of listening with an open heart and mind to the eyewitness accounts of the shepherds? Consider how the author makes the shepherds stand in for the Apostles whose witness would later be the foundation of the Church.

Compare p. 66 par 4 with Luke 8: 1.

Compare p. 71 par 1 with Matthew 4: 18-22

Compare p. 72 par 5 and p. 73. par. 8 with Matthew 14:31, 32.

Compare p. 74 par 3 with John 14: 25, 25; 15: 26, 27 and Matthew 13: 16, 17

Compare p. 74 par 4 with Revelation 21: 9, 10, 14

Compare p. 74 par 5 with Matthew 28: 19, 20

Compare p. 74 par 7 with 1 John 1-3

Compare p. 75 with Matthew 28: 5-7

3. Consider Mary's personal interest in the shepherds and how that reflects the humility she demonstrated in Luke 1: 46-55.

Chapter 6

4. Anam goes through a profound conversion after he hears the testimony of the shepherds (Romans 10: 17). The author lets us in on his mental state as he moves through the process of accepting the truth he has heard. Try to identify the stages he goes through from pages 77-80 and relate them to your own experience, if pertinent.

Confused by the controversy surrounding Jesus.

Wondering if the testimony of the witnesses can be believed.

Impressed by the sincerity of the believers.

Seeking some logical alternative explanation.

Fearful of the changes and challenges that the truth might bring.

Coming at last to acceptance.

Wishing God would give miraculous confirmation.

5. Discuss how Anam's questions of identity and belonging intersect with his memory of the girl he loved but could not marry. (pp 81-83)
6. If Anam's real name is revealed when he shows the old shepherd the sheepskin, why do you think the author continues to call him "Anam"? (p 86)

7. The old shepherd's tale about Anam's father looking through the Jewish Scripture to confirm the identity of the Messiah mirrors the earlier scene of his foster father reading from Isaiah. What story is Anam trying to puzzle out, but what story is God drawing his attention to? (pp 89-92)

Recommended Closing Meditation:

Read the words of Jesus in paragraph 2 and 3 of page 122 as He speaks to those gathered.

Take prayer requests and close with the Lord's Prayer or as the facilitator chooses.

Preparation for Next Week

Prior to the study group's fourth meeting, all participants should read *The Shepherds' Prayer*: chapters 7-8 and the "Word from the Author" (pp 95-125).

WEEK 4

Chapter 7

1. Why has Anam's new found knowledge of his origins not settled his heart? (p 96)
2. What doubts fill Anam's mind and what is he looking for? Have you ever sought for your own reason to believe what your parents told you about the Christian faith? (p 97)
3. Anam's reading of Issachar's testimony parallels and deepens the opening of the book where Micah is pondering Isaiah's prophecy? What role does the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies play in your own faith in Christ? (p 96; discussion)
4. As Anam's questions focus more on the person of Christ, he finds out that Jesus is close by. Have you sought Jesus, only to discover that He was close at hand? (p 107)

Chapter 8

5. Why does Jesus want to hear the stories the shepherds tell? How does his conversation with them reveal His humanity and His divinity? (pp 111-118)
6. How was the announcement of Jesus' birth to humble shepherds an appropriate lesson for those two disciples in particular? (pp 114-115; Matthew 20: 20-28)
7. Why does the author make Jesus the first to call Anam by his real name? (p 120)

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

8. The story began with Anam/Stephen, lonely and isolated at a wedding feast. How is the story of Stephen's martyrdom the perfect resolution to that beginning?
9. How do the shepherds and Stephen inspire us as we enter the Christmas season?

Recommended Closing Meditation:

Read the words of Jesus in paragraph 2 and 3 of page 122 as He speaks to those gathered.

Take prayer requests and close with the Lord's Prayer or as the facilitator chooses.